

Demystifying Gender Roles through Children's Literature: An Analysis of Indian English Picture books

Sthuthi M V

Research Scholar, Dept. of Centre for English Language Studies, University of Hyderabad, India

Article Detail:	Abstract
Received: 25 Apr 2026; Received in revised form: 21 May 2026; Accepted: 26 May 2026; Available online: 30 May 2026 ©2026 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Keywords— Gender-sensitive language, Children's literature, sexism, heteronormativity, and gender binary/ stereotypes.	'Language development plays a very important role in the development of perceptual and practical concepts. Language enables us to check our experiences with others and ensure a shared meaning emerges from them. Thus, making sure that we grasp the socially accepted use of the practical concept or the socially accepted vocabulary that represents the perceptual concept' (NCF 2020, pg.45). This paper tries to uncover the perceptual concepts and their influence on children through language. Sunderland says that both technologies and children's books can unconsciously influence the receptor as agents of socialisation. It is important to create awareness among children about the insensitivity towards gender (including language use). Florent & Walter (1988) opine that sexism is an unconscious cultural bias that is reinforced by the language that people use from childhood onwards. This study is an attempt to explore how gender has been reintroduced as a psychosocial reality to the heteronormative culture established on the grounds of the gender binary through Children's Literature. A qualitative content analysis approach is employed to critically examine the text and illustrations for verbal and visual narration. This paper aims to analyse picture books set in Indian settings as the primary texts. It leverages the idea of gender identity and expression to trace changes in children's literature that foster realisation and change among children. This paper seeks to address the tendency to confine society within a binary framework through children's literature and to explore how children's literature subverts stereotypical norms and calls for a change in society's perspective, especially through the use of gender-sensitive language.

I. INTRODUCTION

Young children become the core pillars of society by being responsible citizens. It is important to consider children's socialisation when designing stories for them. Peterson & Lach (1990) say one of the most crucial and early learning experiences for a young

child is gender development (cited by Narahara, May M). From early childhood, children learn about gender roles. It is typical for elders to appreciate male children for being confident, taking leadership roles, and being brave, and female children for being so soft-spoken, caring, and doing chores. We see nothing

wrong with these observations, but subtle conversations and appreciations matter and can have a significant impact on children. This reinforces that gender roles and gender inequalities are woven into the fabric of our society, with or without our consciousness.

Children are forced to conform to societal expectations about gender identities, and that phenomenon is known as gendering. The term 'gendering' might seem alien to the common people, but the process is not, because it is reinforced by society. According to American sociologist Michael Kimmel (2000), 'Gendering' is the process by which social norms and cultural expectations are shaped and reinforce gender stereotypes and inequalities. Though these gender differences are not innate, people maintain them through various sociocultural mechanisms. Thus, through socialisation and learning, children develop gender schemata that guide their behaviour.

As Pandey's paper points out, what Kane (2012) et al. said is that sociologists observe that societal norms significantly support gender-normative behaviour and discourage gender counter-normative displays, meaning that one's gendered behaviour does not originate in a social vacuum (Pandey, 2022). As cited in Politis (2022), gender is a prime example of how nurture may influence nature, as its influence is so strong and ingrained that people mistake it for the way things always are. Subsequently, our true identities lead to difficulties of marginalisation and identity problems. People are constrained by their roles, constantly aware that they do not fit into the ideal society, which leads to discomfort and the demise of the individual (Copenhaver, 2002; Butler, 2004, 2006; Ferearelli, 2001). Therefore, we must not force any individual to follow the rules that are abided by society, and we must consciously remind ourselves that sex is a biological factor and gender is a social construct.

Children's Literature and Language

Sunderland (1992: 86) says, "TV, films, videos, computer games, newspapers, and children's books can have an unconscious influence on audiences as agents of socialisation, so presumably, can EFL materials". So any text can have a significant impact on readers, whether adults or children; it can have an

immense influence and bring about change. As Peter Hunt claims, children's literature has a long and rich history, dating back to the mid-18th century (Hunt, 2009), and studies have already shown that children's books play an important role in social learning and identity development (Paterson, 1999). It is not just an entertainer; it is no longer a mere discipline but has evolved into a discourse that elicits multidimensional debate on developing perspectives, building identities, etc. The stories, colourful illustrations, and lively animations are an indispensable part of a child's formative years. More than being an entertainer, it also plays a pivotal role in identity formation, developing perspectives and understanding of inclusivity and diversity, and becomes a powerful agent of socialisation, transmitting cultural values, ethical lessons, and fundamental human experiences. The enduring relevance of children's literature lies in its ability to cultivate critical thinkers, compassionate individuals, and global citizens. The illustrations, the language used, everything grabs the children's attention, especially at a very young age.

Teaching from early education will reduce the effort made in the future. The need to publish books like the Supreme Court's Handbook on Combating Gender Stereotypes to assist elder judges and lawyers in using gender-sensitive language is one example. Even now, parents and teachers find it difficult to choose stories for children that discuss political and social issues. The books that think outside the box and that do not conform to the norms are still sidelined. Children who transgresses gender norms are marginalised and become the target of all the 'jokes'. The necessity to challenge gender roles and identities and to break stereotypes is necessary through children's literature with the healthy portrayal of all genders.

Earlier children's literature helped in maintaining the phenomenon of 'gendering' by establishing the heteronormative culture on the grounds of a binary level. The taboo was well maintained in most of the children's literature. Researchers show that the majority of children's books feature male figures; it is always a princess who is helped by a charming prince or a king. Indian English picturebooks published by NGO organisations like *Tulika*, *Gaysi Media*, *Anveshi*, *Pratham Books*, *Karadi Tales*, etc., aim to break the 'tendency' to narrate stories through a binary lens. Instead of marginalising and sidelining women

authors and characters, these stories try to put them at the centre, with a vision and a mission. *Tataki Wins Again* (2008), *Kali Wants to Dance*, *Rainbow Girls and Rainbow Boys*, *Tine and the Faraway Mountain*, *The Weightlifting Princess*, *Sadiq Wants to Stitch*, and *The Boy Who Wore Bangles* are some of the stories that provide examples of stories that defy gender norms, which children feel connected to and help them think critically at the same time. Florent & Walter (1988) opine that sexism is an unconscious cultural bias that is reinforced by the language that people use from childhood onwards. It is so insidious that it goes unnoticed and reinforces gender stereotypes, conditioning children to accept the way they see their surroundings. With the help of children's literature, we can help children reexamine the gender beliefs and assumptions that develop through the process of 'gendering' through subtle changes in language use.

In *The Lenses of Gender Transforming the Debate on Sexual Inequality*, Sandra Bem (1993) drew attention to the understanding of gender at the time and revealed the idea that the strict adherence to either masculine or feminine gender roles cannot be psychologically healthy for the individual. The idea of androgyny was proposed as a healthy alternative. She also challenged the idea of gender as an essential identity by claiming that gender is something learned from the demonstrations around people and pointed out how children internalise these social gender roles. This concept of androgyny and the idea that rigidly adhering the binary roles as psychologically unhealthy, can be employed in reading the gender non-conforming experiences for better understanding of the child protagonists.

Looking through Children's Books

In the story *Tataki Wins Again*, written by Gogu Shyamala, the central character is a girl, Balamma (Tataki), who is called a 'tomboy' by a labourer for her boldness. This story explores gender and shows how brave a girl is in helping her father water their bund, and her vibrant character takes risks and remains active throughout. It breaks the stereotypical portrayals of boys as always active and girls as passive. Here, Balamma takes the lead and fights back, saving herself from the landowner. Moreover, it shows a family's affection through simple acts and subtle word choices, making it feel relatable. Along with the theme of gender violence, this also discusses

the caste hierarchy. The illustrations add beauty to the story, keeping the children's attention throughout. The dialogue, "*Tataki! You bloody witch! You are a small girl, are you? What makes you come here like a man and water the groundnut fields? In our houses, girls like you don't step into the field. You malas and madigas don't even know that girls have to be kept at home! You are a small girl, are you?*" shows how girls were treated and what they had to fight through for being so brave. Even when she was dragged and beaten, she fought to teach our children how to fight in these situations, and Tataki became a role model for children. "*She aimed and kicked him as hard as she could on the groin with both her legs*". Rather than presenting Tataki as a girl with superpowers, like any other person, Tataki (Balamma) was beaten. Then she stood and fought for herself without losing herself, neither waiting for someone to help.

So many organisers and publishers bring enlightening stories that discuss gender identities and defy gender norms. *Rainbow Girls and Rainbow Boys* are two such stories published by Pratham Books, which represent the different ways a girl and a boy would like to live and present themselves. "*Ma, if Didi can wear it, why can't I?*" The question asked by a boy in *Rainbow Boys* depicts a child's curiosity about why they are being restrained under certain conditions, yet the child still chooses to follow his own way. The same way *Sadiq Wants to Stitch* is a story published by Karadi Tales in which the boy is determined to follow his passion even after his mother reminds him that the boys in their community do not stitch. *The Boy Who Wore Bangles* shows the love for bangles for a boy while he wears them and dances. Through verbal and visual texts, these stories defy gender norms and teach children to break the notions that were followed earlier.

The stories, based on real-life situations, such as *Kali Wants to Dance*, in which a boy from a Dalit community with an immense passion for classical dance learns and becomes a professional dancer, even though no boys used to learn at that time. Another story is about a woman, Tine, in *Tine and the Faraway Mountain*, who climbed Mount Everest at the age of 25 while disguised as a male porter to achieve her goal. Each book portrays gender-diverse children engaged in cultural reflections on gender roles and expressions.

Children believe that they are categorised into particular genders and associate themselves with specific roles attributed to them by the patriarchal, conventional society. Children learn from their surroundings to internalise masculine and feminine schemas, and that's where we understand the significance of children's literature. Through lexicogrammatical and visual patterns, gender roles and identities are reinforced in children. Sandra Bem (1981) says schemas are mental shortcuts or frameworks that help pay attention to and learn new information that is directly relevant to them. Information that is pertinent to a schema is more likely to fit in people's minds than unrelated information. Moreover, people often recall details mistakenly to keep them consistent with their schemas, which modifies how they perceive the world (Bem, 1981). This proves that gender is a psycho-social reality, the behaviour is developed and maintained by the influence of our surroundings. The self-monitoring society proposed by Foucault in Panopticon describes how people in society become intensely aware of the critical scrutiny on them, that they will limit themselves to be acceptable to others, and how we subtly teach our children to follow the same through children's picture books. The fear of punishment, ridicule, and disapproval faced by gender non-conforming children in asserting themselves can be read along the same lines. To fit in and as per society passively forces us to act in a particular way, we perform our gender by imitating, as Butler said, 'gender is performative'.

II. CONCLUSION

Children learn gender roles through their interactions with others and through socialisation in childhood. They imitate others, learn from interacting with them, and gain insights from the stories they listen to. It is important to include stories that discuss gender and defy gender norms. The narratives serve as a basic tool for fostering children's perceptions of themselves and others, and help them think critically about the complexities of human interactions. Along with discussing gender roles and breaking traditional representations, introducing characters with different relationships and representing different genders in the stories helps introduce diverse genders and foster empathy towards others. With the rich tapestry of

stories within the pages, children will learn to honour their individuality, interact with respect, develop critical thinking skills, and empower themselves.

REFERENCES

- [1] Bem, Sandra Lipsitz. *"Gender, Sexuality and Inequality: When Many Become One, Who Is the One and What Happens to the Others?"* Moen, Phyllis et al. *A Nation Divided: Diversity, Inequality, and Community in American Society*. Cornell University Press, 1998.
- [2] Bem, Sandra Lipsitz. *The Lenses of Gender Transforming the Debate on Sexual Inequality*. Access and Diversity, Crane Library, University of British Columbia, 2015.
- [3] Bhasin, Kamla. *Rainbow Girls and Rainbow Boys*. Pratham Books.
- [4] Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender*. New York, Routledge, 2004.
- [5] Cameron, Deborah. *Verbal Hygiene, The Politics of Language*. New York: Routledge, 1995. Book.
- [6] Doda, Ridhhi Maniar. *The Boy Who Wore Bangles*. Karadi Tales.
- [7] Florent, J. & Walter, C. (1988). A better role for women in TEFL. *ELT Journal*, 43(3), pp. 180-84
- [8] Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish*. Vintage, 2012
- [9] Gure, Dr Gobind Singh. *Gender Sensitisation: Significance of Education*. 2016; pp 117-119.
- [10] *Handbook on Combating Gender Stereotypes*. Supreme Court.
- [11] Hunt, Peter. *Understanding Children's Literature*. New York: Routledge, 1999. Book.
- [12] Karthikeyan, Aparna. *Kali Wants to Dance*. Pratham Books. 2021
- [13] Kimmel, Michael S. *Gender and Society*, Dec., 2000, Vol. 14, No. 6 (Dec., 2000), pp. 827-829
- [14] Nainy, Mamta. *Sadiq Wants to Stitch*. Karadi Tales.
- [15] Narahara, M. M. (1998). *Gender stereotypes in children's picture books* (Project). University of California
- [16] Peterson, S. B., & Lach, M. A. (1990). *Gender stereotypes in children's books: Their prevalence and influence on cognitive and affective development*. *Gender and Education*, 2, 185-197.
- [17] Politis, D. (2022). *Gender in Children's Literature: Through or Beyond Conventions?* *Advances in Literary Study*, 10, 129-140.
- [18] Rajendran, Sowmya. *The Weightlifting Princess*. Pratham Books.
- [19] Shyamala, Gogu. *Tataki Wins Again*. 2008. DC Books.
- [20] Sunderland, J. (1992). *Gender in the EFL Classroom*. *ELT Journal*. 46(1): pp. 81-91.
- [21] Tripathi, Shikha. *Tine and the Faraway Mountain*. Pratham Books.